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Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 H-01 INR-07 L-02

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 RSC-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 OMB-01 SAJ-01 COME-00 /057 W
---------- 048173
R 030454Z JAN 75
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9496

C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 0066

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, RP
SUBJECT: POLITICAL PRISONERS: FR. EDICIO DE LA TORRE

REF: MANILA 15125

BEGIN SUMMARY: FATHER DE LA TORRE, ON A HUNGER STRIKE SINCE CHRISTIMAS DAY, HAS BEEN ACCUSED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF BEING PART OF AN "ELABORATE, CLANDESTINE" COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK OPERATED BY THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE PHILIPPINES. IN A FLURRY OF RELATED EVENTS, A SECOND PRIEST HAS JOINED THE FAST AND ARCHBISHOP SIN'S REQUEST FOR A JOINT CHURCH-MILITARY INVESTIGATIONS OF ACCUSTATIONS OF TORTURE AND BRUTALITIY AT COAMP OLIVAS WAS REJECTED. THE MILITARY HAS, HOWEVER, AGREED TO HOLD AN EMERGENCY MEETING OF THE CMLC ON JANUARY 6. WHILE THE GOVERNMENT MAY BELIEVE (PROBABLY JUSTIFIABLY SO) IT IS ON FIRM GROUND WITH REGARD TO TIS CHARGES OF SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES IN THE CASES OF THE TWO SVD PRIESTS, ACCUSTATIONS OF BRUTALITYAND TORTURE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS WILL BE DAMAGING IF NOT PROMPTLY REBUTTED BY AN IMPARTIAL INVESTIGATION. MANILA PRESS JANUARY 3 HEADLINES SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ENRILE'S ORDER FOR "FULL SCALE PROBE" OF DETAINEE MALTREATMENT CHARGES ALTHOUGH PRESS ACCOUNTS FOCUS PRIMARILY ON COMMUNIST COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK ROLLED UP BY GOVERNMENT. END SUMMARY.

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1. THE DE LA TORRE AFFAIR SOWEHAT BELATEDLY (HE WAS

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ARRESTED DECEMBER 13) RECEIVED FRONT-PAGE TREATMENT IN CONTROLLED PRESS JANUARY 2 IN FORM OF STATEMENT ISSUED BY DEFENSE DEPARTMENT. UNDER HEADLINES SUCH AS "RED NETWORK BROKEN UP*" (TIMES JOURNAL), IT WAS REPORTED THAT TWO CATHOLIC PRIESTS AND 28 OTHER SUSPECTS HAD BEEN ARRESTED AFTER SEVERAL MONTHSO OF SURVEILLANCE. A MILITARY SPOKESMAN STATED THAT THE PRIESTS WERE PART OF AN "ELABORATE, CLANDESTINE" COMMUNCIATIONS NETWORK OPERATED BY THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE PHILIPPINES. THOSE ARRESTED WOULD BE CHARGED WITH"CONSPIRACY TO COMMIT REBELLION AND FOR PRINTING, POSSESSING, DISTRIBUTING AND CIRCULATING SUBVERSIVE MATERIALS."

2. A FLURRY OF RELATED EVENTS HAVE OCCURRED SINCE DE LA TORRE STARTED HIS HUNGER STRIKE CHRISTMAS DAY "TO PROTEST TORTURE AND INDEFINITE DETENTION OF OTHER POLITICAL PRISONERS." FR. MANUEL LAHOZ (SVD) JOINED THE FAST DECEMBER 29. ON DECEMBER 28, ARCHBISHOP SIN ADDRESSED A LETTER TO MGEN FIDEL RAMOS (PC COMMANDER) SUGGESTING A JOINT CHURCH-MILITARY INVESTIGATION INTO CHARGES OF TORTURE AND BRUTALITY AT CAMP OLIVAS. WHEN NO RESPONES WAS FORTHCOMING , A 3-MEMBER CHURCH DELEGATION ACCOMPANIED BY CHIEF MILITARY VICAR BISHOP GAVIOLA TRAVELLED TO PAMPANGA ON DECEMBER 31. THEY WERE REFUSED ENTRY TO CAMP OLIVAS BY BGEN TOMAS DIAZ (COMMANDER, FIRST CONSTABULARY ZONE) WHO TOLD THE GROUP THAT THE VISIT HAD NOT BEEN CLEARED WITH DEFENSE MINISTER PONCE ENRILE.

3. EARLIER, HOWEVER, ON DECEMBER 28, A CATHOLIC NUN-PHYSICIAN (SR. LOURDER PALMA) HAD BEEN ADMITTED TO OLIVAS AND HAD SUCCEEDED IN CONVERSING WITH 6 WOMEN AND 8 MEN INMATES. SHE LATER (JANUARY 1) TOLD AP THAT HER "BRIEF EXAMINATION" CONVINCED HER THAT THEY HAD BEEN TORTURED. A SPOLESMAN FOR ARCHBISHOP SIN ANNOUNCED THAT HER REPORT WOULD NOT BE RELEASED "UNTIL A MORE DETAILED EXAMINATION COULD BE MADE...SHE HERSELF SAID THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH TIME TO CONFIRM WHAT SHE WAS TOLD."

4. UNTIL THE JANUARY 2 PRESS COVERAGE, THERE HAD BEEN LITTLE IF ANY LOCAL PUBLICITY GIVEN THE DE LA TORRE AFFAIR. HOWEVER, AP HAS GIVEN THE MATTER AMPLE ATTENTION. IN A DECEMBER 23 RADIO/TV INTERVIEW, PONCE ENRILE STATED THAT CONFIDENTIAL

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ON THE WHOLE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH WERE "VERY CORDIAL". HOWEVER, HE CONTINUED, SOME CHURCH ELEMENTS (NO NAMES MENTIONED) WERE "CONSORTING" WITH LEFTIST SUBVERSIVES TRYING TO OVERTHROW THE GOVERNMENT AND "WE CANNOT ALLOW THIS."

5. THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION WAS GIVEN THE LABATT BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF MANILA'S OFFICE ON JANAURY 2. THE

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RAMOS REPLY (DATED DEC 31) TO SIN'S LETTER WAS NOT RECEIVED UNTIL JANUARY 2. IN EFFECT, RAMOS HAD STATED THAT A JOINT INVESTIGATION WAS "NOT FEASIBLE", BUT PROMISED THAT A "FAIR AND IMPARTIAL INVESTIGATION" WOULD BE UNDERTAKEN. IN A SEPARATE DEVELOPMENT, HOWEVER, THE MILITARY HAVE AGREED TO HOLD AN EMERGENCY MEETING OF THE CHURCH-MILITARY LIAISON COMMITTEE (CMLC) ON JANUARY 6 TO DISCUSS THE DE LA TORRE AFFAIR. IN THE MEANTIME, A GROUP OF CHURCH LEADERS TOLD SIN ON JANUARY 2 THAT FATHER ED WAS GETTING WEAKER, AND THEY HOPED THAT THE ARCHBISHOP WOULD DO SOMETHING. HE REPLIED THAT HE DID NOT SEE WHAT MORE HE COULD DO FOLLOWING THE NEGATIVE RESULTS OF THE RAMOS LETTER AND TO INTERFERE MORE WOULD NOT BE PROPER.

6. ON JANUARY 3, MANILA PRESS HEADLINED DEFENSE SECRETARY ENRILE'S ORDER TO AFP CHIEF OF STAFF ESPINO TO CONDUCT INTENSIVE INVESTIGATION OF MALTREATMENT CHARGES. ENRILE REPORTEDLY ALSO REITERATED EARLIER DIRECTIVE FOR "HUMANE AND COMPASSIONATE" TREATMENT OF DETAINEES AND PROMISE THAT MILITARY VIOLATING THIS DIRECTIVE WOULD BE PUNISHED. AP REPORTS JANUARY 3 ACTING CHAIRMAN OF ASSN OF RELIGIOUS SUPERIORS TERMED GOVERNMENT INVESTIGATION "COMMENDABLE" BUT EXPRESSED UNHAPPINESS DETAINEES COULD NOT BE EXAMINED PRIOR CMLC MEETING. ACCORDING SVD SUPERIOR, WHO SAW TWO PRIESTS JANUARY 2, DE LA TORRE IS WEAK BUT STILL ABLE WALK. LAHOZ ENDED HIS FAST AFTER THREE DAYS BECAUSE OF KIDNEY AILMENT.

7. COMMENT: WHILE THE GOVERNMENT MAY BELIEVE (PROBABLY JUSTIFIABLY SO) IT IS ON FIRM GROUND WITH REGARD TO ITS CHARGES OF SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES IN THE CASES OF DE LA TORRE AND LAHOZ, ACCUSATIONS OF BRUATALITY AND TORTURE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS WILL BE DAMAGING IF NOT PROMPTLY REBUTTED
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BY AN IMPARTIAL INVESTIGATION. THE HUNGER STRIKE OF THE TWO PRIESTS HAS ALREADY SET OFF EMOTIONAL RESPONSES IN RELIGIOUS CIRCLES. SOME 35 OF 70 SUPERIORS OF WOMEN'S CATHOLIC ORDERS HAVE REPORTEDLY ANNOUNCED THEIR INTENTION TO START SYMBOLIC FASTS IN SUPPORT OF THE TWO SVD PRIESTS. SIN HAS PRUDENTLY DECIDED TO DO NOTHING MORE FOR THE TIME BEING. BY PUBLICIZING FULL SCALE PROBE OF MALTREATMENT CHARGES AND BY DOCUMENTING EXISTENCE COMMUNIST COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK, GOVERNMENT OBVIOUSLY HOPES TO DEFUSE WIDESPREAD RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR FASTING PRIESTS. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHETHER INVESTIGATION AND JANUARY 6 CMLC EMERGENCY MEETING CAN PREVENT DE LA TORRE AFFAIR FROM ASSUMING ASPECT OF ANOTHER CHURCH-STATE CONFRONTATION.
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